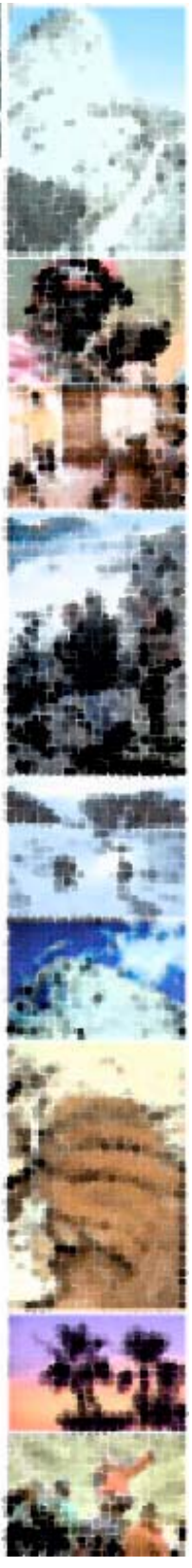
School of GeoSciences
Institute of Geography

Institute of Geography Online Paper Series: GEO-007



Is Counselling a Feminist Practice?

Liz Bondi, The University of Edinburgh

Paper accepted for publication in *GeoJournal* (special issue on Gender, Place and Policy edited by Fran Klodawsky and Valerie Preston)

Contact details
Professor Liz Bondi, Institute of Geography, School of GeoSciences, The University of Edinburgh, Drummond Street, Edinburgh EH8 9XP, Scotland, UK, Tel. +44 (0) 131-650-2529, Fax +44 (0) 131-650-2524, Email: liz.bondi@ed.ac.uk

Is Counselling a Feminist Practice?

Abstract

Women's efforts to influence policies have complex effects, which are often difficult to evaluate. This paper identifies four themes in feminist politics through which to analyse whether a particular intervention involving substantial numbers of women – that of counselling in the UK – can be understood as a feminist practice. These themes are concerned with gender equality, women's autonomy, recognition of diversity among women and the deconstruction of gender norms. In its early post-war origins prior to the emergence of second wave feminism, and in the stories recounted by women practitioners at the turn of millennium, counselling emerges as contradictory and ambivalent in relation to these themes in feminist politics.

Key words

counselling, feminisms, policy, UK, women,

Is Counselling a Feminist Practice?

Introduction

In many different countries and contexts feminists have advanced critiques of a wide range of public policies. Notwithstanding their particularities, a number of common themes emerge from these critiques. For example, numerous commentators have noted the persistence of gender inequalities, failures to listen to women's voices, the perpetuation of crude and inaccurate stereotypes about women's lives, and the treatment of either women in general or particular groups of women as deviations from a supposed norm. In rich and varied ways women have worked to change public policies, whether through direct influence on processes of policy formulation and implementation, or indirectly through the development of alternative activities and forms of provision. Perhaps the most successful of these efforts are those that aim to redress gender imbalances, such as positive action initiatives and gender mainstreaming (see, for example, Rees 1999). Alternatively, what began as wholly independent efforts to address women's concerns may secure public funding or be otherwise incorporated within governmental policies.

The consequences of such developments are often difficult to evaluate. To take one example, when organisations that address domestic violence secure public funds, their capacity to provide services may become much more secure, but their freedom to campaign politically may be undermined (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Hague and Malos 1993; Mullender 1996). Evaluation may prove still more complicated in cases where the political impulses underlying action around women's issues are themselves ambivalent. An example I discuss in this paper concerns organisations that seek to support women and men experiencing relationship difficulties. The extent to which such organisations are committed to opening up debates about the nature of families and personal relationships may be hard to assess, especially if they are partially incorporated within public policy initiatives. Are they intrinsically pro-marriage and heteronormative, which they may choose to indicate to some funders, or do they offer possibilities for challenging social norms, which they may suggest to some potential service users? Even if policies and policy outcomes are subject to 'gender analysis' or 'gender proofing', their impacts on women may be highly contestable.

This paper explores the case of counselling in the UK, focusing on what it means for women who work as counsellors. From its post-war origins as a social welfare intervention offered by non-governmental voluntary sector agencies, counselling services have subsequently proliferated across a wide range of settings including educational institutions, primary health care practices, workplaces, and in the private sector, where it is offered as a response to wide range of forms of distress. Except in the private sector, it is usually offered free at the point of access, and in many contexts can be accessed without intermediaries or gatekeepers. The British Association for Counselling has defined the aim of counselling as being to provide "an opportunity for the client to work towards living in a more satisfying and resourceful way", and has specified that "[t]he counsellor's role is to facilitate the client's work in ways that respect the client's values, personal resources and capacity for self-determination" (Bond 1993, pp. 210-211).

While precise numbers of counsellors, clients, and counselling services are impossible to estimate because the practice is not subject to legally binding controls, membership of the British Association for Counsellors provides an indication of the rate of growth: the organisation was formed in 1976 and in 1977 reported that it had 1,000 individual members; by 1992 this had grown to 8,500, and by 2003 it exceeded 20,000 (McLeod 1993; British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy 2003). A recent survey of voluntary sector counselling in Scotland found that women made up 80 per cent of practitioners (Bondi et al. 2003), and there is no reason to suppose that the gender mix is different in other sectors or other parts of the UK.

Second wave feminism has generated some fractious and intense debates about counselling, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Some have viewed these practices as unremittingly anti-feminist, constituting deeply malign, manipulative and disempowering means for keeping women – especially 'uppity' women – in their place, that is subordinate to men (Weir and Wilson 1984; Wilson 1981). But others have interpreted counselling, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis rather differently, seeing the underlying theories as useful resources for understanding women's oppression, and observing the practices as contexts within which women's talk and women's experiences are taken seriously (Mitchell 1974; Rose 1983). However, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis have been expensive to access privately, with public sector versions available primarily via the highly problematic route of psychiatric services. Counselling has been a lot more accessible by virtue of its availability free at the point of access and without recourse to intermediaries. Training has also been rather more accessible, developing initially in the voluntary sector, and subsequently in institutions of further and higher education, the former admitting students without formal academic qualifications. Consequently larger numbers of female practitioners are involved in counselling than in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. However, feminist commentators have tended either to neglect counselling altogether or to assume that analyses of psychotherapy apply equally to counselling.

In this paper, I explore the possibility that the development of counselling in the UK might be regarded as an implicit expression of feminist politics. After briefly unpacking the notion of 'feminist politics' in order to make available some conceptual resources for my analysis, I explore the initial development of counselling in the UK, which was pioneered in the years immediately following the second world war by voluntary sector organisations concerned with the institution of marriage. I then draw on interviews conducted with practitioners working in voluntary sector settings in Scotland to explore women's accounts of their involvement in counselling work. My analysis is also informed by my own immersion within the field. I began a counselling training programme in the mid-1990s and, since 1997, have worked for a few hours per week on an unpaid basis at a local voluntary sector agency. Over these years, during which I have met many other counsellors, I have become increasingly fascinated and perplexed by the relationship between feminism and counselling.

Approaches to feminist politics

As numerous commentators have argued, it is more accurate to refer to feminisms (in the plural) than feminism (in the singular). I engage with this plurality by considering four themes, which, to varying degrees, inform a great deal of feminist political practice and feminist policy analysis, namely equality, autonomy, diversity and deconstruction[1]. These ideas frequently operate alongside one another, sometimes mutually reinforcing each other and sometimes more contradictorily. For example, demands for equality may be pursued in ways that work with or against claims for autonomy, and with or against the recognition of diversity among women (Hirsch and Keller 1990). By thinking in terms of these themes, my intention is to open up discussion of some of the tensions associated with the development of counselling in the UK. I also link these themes to geographical ways of thinking about politics, paving the way for consideration of the kinds of spaces counselling work offers women.

The struggle for equality has been a key motivating factor for feminist politics. The politics of gender equality are grounded in the idea that membership of the category 'human', or at least 'human adult', is far more significant than membership of the sub-divisions 'women' and 'men'. The idea of equality has its origins in engagements with liberal humanist philosophical traditions, which feminists have critiqued on the grounds of androcentrism and sought to render more inclusive. This has sponsored campaigns for legal and political rights, especially in first wave feminism, and economic and social rights, especially in second wave feminism (Whelehan

1995). Campaigns for equal rights aim to generate opportunities for women to engage in activities such as paid work on equal terms to me. In so doing equality seeks to enable gender integration in a wide variety of contexts, and therefore to degender space (Spain 1992). The theme of equality often underpins efforts to 'gender-proof' policy initiatives.

For Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1997) women's autonomy or self-determination was understood as a pre-requisite for the capacity to exercise equal rights. However, during second-wave feminism, the idea of autonomy for women tended to become more of an end in itself, through, for example, the pursuit of greater independence and separation from men (Morgan 1970). This shift seeks to spatialise women's autonomy more fully, and often opposes or at least questions moves to enhance gender integration. In so doing, a strategy of women's autonomy counters the assumption that spaces are ever gender neutral. It works instead to expose and challenge the numerous ways in which places and spaces are gendered (Rose 1993), and to generate women-only, women-focused, or at least women-friendly spaces (Valentine 1997).

While a feminist strategy of equality emphasises similarities between women and men, a feminist strategy of autonomy emphasises differences. But the exclusive focus on gender in both strategies has attracted considerable criticism on the grounds that it glosses over numerous important differences among women, and in so doing repeats and intensifies exclusions and oppressions associated with class, racialisation, heteronormativity and disability (see for example Ramazanoglu 1989). Concern with diversity has therefore sponsored political mobilisation around social identities, many of which focus on issues of recognition (Fraser 2000). While sometimes divisive and militating against shared political agendas, recognition of diversity has also enabled political strategies based on the careful building of alliances, rather than on false assumptions about solidarity. Building such alliances requires consideration of women's varied experiences, including how geography contributes to the construction of difference (Pratt and Hanson 1994). The theme of diversity therefore involves attention to how space differentiates the impacts of policy interventions and how such interventions contribute to the production of geographically diverse effects (Massey 1994).

The idea of diversity draws attention to the way in which gender is fractured by race, class, age, sexuality, disability and so on, and therefore to the multiplicity of femininities and masculinities. Deconstruction calls into question the idea that identities ever stabilise or cohere around any version of femininity or masculinity. Gender is understood as a fiction that regulates our lives, with this fiction being generated and sustained performatively (Butler 1990). To describe gender as a fiction and as performative does not make it possible to escape or even to rewrite its binary structure. Instead, deconstruction presents an account of gender as one of the ways in which we are constituted as human subjects with the capacity to experience agency. This theme in feminist politics seeks to highlight and problematise deeply taken for granted assumptions about gender, especially its binary form. It does not offer the possibility of radical alternatives, but instead it invites us to think about moments and spaces that contain subversive possibilities, for example through exposing contradictions or paradoxes embedded in normative constructions of gender. The theme of deconstruction has been crucial in elaborating the co-construction of gender and space, and what Elspeth Probyn (2003) describes as "the spatial imperative of subjectivity".

The origins of counselling in the UK: post-war marriage counselling

In the UK, the emergence of counselling owes its origins to the work of two closely related voluntary sector bodies, which came into being in the 1940s as the National Marriage Guidance Council (which operated in England and Wales), and the Scottish Marriage Guidance Council. (These organisations have since changed their names to Relate and Couple Counselling Scotland respectively.) The Marriage Guidance Councils developed a practice known at first as 'marriage

guidance', then as 'marriage counselling', and more recently as 'relationship counselling', which was offered by volunteers who they selected, trained and supervised. The majority of these volunteers were white, middle-class women. Services were provided through affiliated local agencies, initially for married couples only, but, in due course counselling was offered to anyone with any kind of concern pertaining to relationships of any kind, including same-sex relationships.

As the original reference to 'marriage' suggests, the Marriage Guidance Councils came into existence in response to increasing concern about the institution of marriage. At outset they were explicitly committed to 'saving' marriages. The Marriage Guidance Councils were, therefore, caught up with conservative perspectives on the politics of gender in which the traditional, patriarchal, institution of marriage needed to be supported, even shored up, in the face of trends set in train, at least to some extent, by women's war-time experiences of greater equality and greater autonomy. The practice of marriage counselling might therefore be thought of as antithetical to feminist politics of all hues. This interpretation is further supported by a key requirement of volunteer practitioners in the early days, namely that they must themselves be married and heterosexual (Lewis et al. 1992). Together with the predominance of white, middle-class women among practitioners, all of this suggests active intolerance of many kinds of differences, and an in-built resistance to challenges to hegemonic constructions of gender.

The story of the Marriage Guidance Councils is not, however, so straightforward. As Jane Lewis and her colleagues emphasise in their study of the National Marriage Guidance Council, for many years the organisation was characterised by internal tension, ambivalence and compromise in its views about marriage (Lewis et al. 1992). While their account portrays the National Marriage Guidance Council as lacking clarity about its mission and purpose, its survival, growth and high public profile combine to suggest that its capacity to hold together diverse views may also have been an important strength. I examine elements of its approach to counselling in relation to themes associated with feminist politics.

In the late 1940s the Marriage Guidance Councils began to take up some of the ideas of American psychotherapist Carl Rogers. Rogers was very critical of the relations of authority that characterised American psychotherapy in the 1930s and 1940s, in which the practitioner was positioned as knowledgeable expert and the client or patient as inexpert dependent (Rogers 1951, 1961). He argued for a much more egalitarian approach, and developed a distinctive theory and practice, variously known as 'Rogerian', 'non-directive', 'client-centred' and 'person-centred', the latter being the term adopted by practitioners today. While not specified in gendered terms, marriage counsellors were nevertheless expected to adopt the principles of equal treatment and equal respect in their work with all clients, whether couples or individual men or women.

Marriage counsellors were trained to draw on their existing relational skills and experiences in order to facilitate the clients with whom they worked to communicate more effectively, and to understand better their own and each others' feelings. Refraining from judgements was a key tenet, and although it took some time and considerable debate before the Marriage Guidance Councils fully abandoned their express support for the institution of marriage, from the early days counsellors were certainly expected to accept that separation and divorce might be the outcome chosen by clients, whether attending individually or as couples (Lewis et al. 1992). Indeed a significant proportion of their work was with people addressing the aftermath of such decisions. Not only were the great majority of counsellors women, but so too were the majority of clients: counselling most often took place between two women or between a female counsellor and a heterosexual couple. While the former constituted a women-only space, the latter created a women-focused space in that women's actual concerns, as well as traditionally 'feminine' issues about emotional life, were assured respect and validation. Marriage counselling can therefore be understood, at least in part, as an implicit expression of the theme of women's

autonomy that provided spaces within which women were supported to enhance their capacity for self-definition and self-determination.

During the early years of its development in the UK, which predated second wave feminism, counselling became a practice that created particular kinds of spaces within which women's autonomy could be fostered. These spaces valued a particular form of equality, namely egalitarianism within interpersonal relationships. How these spaces might be used in relation to issues of gender identities was open: they allowed the possibility for rethinking the position of women within intimate personal relationships but they did not guarantee any significant challenge to established norms. I would therefore suggest that while counselling expressed the theme of women's autonomy, and was enabling of equality at the level of individuals, it was, at best, neutral in relation to the themes of diversity and deconstruction.

As a practice that involved large numbers of women, and as second wave feminism developed through the late 1960s onwards, counselling and feminism inevitably had some impact on each. In the late 1970s and early 1980s a disparaging remark was circulating in at least some strands of the British women's liberation movement, about women who "got out of politics and into therapy". The remark expressed a concern that practices like counselling and psychotherapy tend to de-fuse and privatise personal experiences which feminism sought to publicise and politicise. But, whether or not feminists abandoned their political activities, it was certainly the case that significant numbers were drawn into counselling, whether as clients or practitioners or both. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least in some quarters their feminist commitments were downplayed in counselling contexts. For example, at a counselling research conference I attended in May 2001, I met a woman I had last seen some 15 years previously when we were both members of a socialist feminist group. She had subsequently trained as a counsellor and had been a practitioner for several years. She knew many of the women at the conference and commented to me that the place was full of what she called 'closet feminists'. The closeting of feminism within counselling is certainly problematic, but perhaps not surprising given that the term 'feminism' has acquired negative connotations in many quarters (Faludi 1992). In the next section I examine how women who are counsellors today think about counselling in relation to the themes of feminist politics.

Practitioners' stories

In this section I extend my analysis of the gendered spaces associated with counselling by exploring what the practice means to women practitioners. I address in turn the themes of autonomy, equality, diversity and deconstruction, drawing on interviews conducted in 2001/2002 with counsellors working in voluntary sector agencies in four different parts of Scotland. Of 104 people interviewed, 69 were women. These women ranged in aged from early 30s to early 70s, and came form a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds. I draw on their accounts using pseudonyms.

Autonomy

Brenda was in her early-70s when she was interviewed. She was brought up in a working-class household in a poor neighbourhood in urban Scotland. Rather against the odds she completed her secondary schooling, and then began clerical work in the Civil Service. She married in her mid-20s and at that time – the early 1950s – that meant she lost her job[2]. Wage earning was not a key issue for her at this time, but not working did not suit her either, and so she answered an advertisement calling for volunteers to train as marriage counsellors. This she did, and, with some breaks, continued to do voluntary work as a marriage counsellor, and subsequently as a marriage-counselling tutor, for many years. She refuted the notion that marriage counselling was an avowedly middle-class practice, and her own upward mobility has done nothing to dampen

her life-time commitment to socialism.

Partly because of the self-confidence she gained through her voluntary work, in her late-30s Brenda went to university, from which she proceeded to a paid post in a college of education. In this context she developed and delivered counselling training programmes. In so doing she contributed to the expansion of opportunities to train for counselling work, and to its growing professionalisation, one aspect of which has been a shift from non-academic voluntary sector training to academically-validated degree courses. She remained strongly committed to ensuring the accessibility of counselling training, supporting the entry of non-standard students to the college setting and running courses on an outreach basis. Brenda retired from her college position some years ago but continued to work on a freelance basis as a trainer and counselling provider. She expressed a passion for counselling, which she came to through her search for rewarding voluntary work. Unpaid marriage counselling supported her non-standard route into a career in which she raised the status of counselling training and sought to safeguard its accessibility to women like herself.

Brenda's story portrays counselling as a clear expression of women's autonomy. Initially, volunteering as a marriage counsellor enabled her to find meaningful work in a context of continuing discrimination that closed down other opportunities. Subsequently she pursued a career that consistently validated facets of experience that are strongly associated with femininity and often relegated to the margins. Although she never explicitly sought to create women-only spaces her work was often women-focused in its effects. Moreover, the professionalisation of counselling to which her work contributed has the potential to foster women's autonomy by supporting women's financial independence. The remaining accounts I discuss come from women who have trained as counsellors more recently than Brenda, beneficiaries of the expansion of training opportunities to which she contributed.

Equality

Erica also comes from a working-class background, which she describes as materially and emotionally very impoverished. She fell pregnant and married at 16, three more babies arriving over the next few years. In the early 1990s, after the youngest started school, and when she was in her late-20s, Erica began to have a little more time for herself. Not knowing why it appealed, she signed up for an assertiveness training course. The trainer commented positively on the supportive way in which she interacted with the other women and encouraged her to take another course – an introduction to counselling skills. The encouragement meant a great deal to Erica and helped her take an important step in her own self-development:

> "Someone had valued me and [said] that the things I have to offer were valid, where I had felt that they weren't […]. I was told so often that I was rubbish and I didn't have it in me, you know, that [I thought] that was how it was. And [I] was able to get in touch with who I was, and the strengths that I had, and the value that I had."

In due course, Erica got involved in a local voluntary sector organisation, which paid for further training in return for her time as a volunteer doing telephone help-line work and some face-to-face counselling. Some time after she completed her training, she secured a part-time paid position as a counsellor in the same organisation. She now works there for three days a week, and does some sessional work as a counselling trainer at a college of further education.

Erica's account highlights the crucial role that the voluntary sector continues to play in the availability of counselling training, not necessarily as direct providers but as sponsors

paying for the training of volunteers in return for their unpaid labour. For some, including Erica, that is a stepping stone enabling women from a wide range of backgrounds to obtain qualifications leading to paid work. For her, counselling opened up a space in which proclamations of equality of opportunity could become a reality. There is a close interweaving in her story between the theme of autonomy and the theme of equality, the former operating as a pre-condition for the latter.

The growth of counselling services to which I have referred suggests that there are plenty of paid jobs available. However, the accounts offered by several of the women interviewed indicate considerable divergence between that image and the reality. Indeed, the paucity of paid jobs, and especially full-time jobs, for counsellors was remarked upon by several interviewees, the consequences of which are illustrated vividly by Debbie's story. After leaving school, she completed a university degree, from which she proceeded to a well-paid job in computing. After a few years she grew to hate the work, and, in her late-30s, she decided to give up her career and to retrain as a counsellor. Most training programmes are part-time and typically take at least three years to complete. Full professional recognition in the form of counsellor accreditation takes at least two more years. Debbie was interviewed nearly eight years after quitting her original job. She still lacked the necessary qualifications for paid counselling work, and was working full-time in an administrative position. She was doing some unpaid counselling as well, but the prospect of making the career change she had originally envisaged had been put on hold:

> "you do training in the hope that you can change careers, and then come out at the end of it and realise all the work's voluntary. So it's kind of difficult to know […], could I ever make money? […] I was doing part-time work and was [hoping to] try and get counselling work to fill in the rest of the time, but then I took this job which is full-time […]. Money is kind of committed so a drop in salary would not be easy at this point. So it does sometimes feel like, you know, I was quite sure about the direction I was going in and I've sort of gone off on a different fork."

Debbie was earning considerably less than she would have been had she continued in computing, and she is, again, not satisfied by her paid work. It is likely that there are many more like her who give up completely on the once hoped-for career shift.

As I described earlier in this paper, counselling in the UK originated as a practice embedded in middle-class voluntarism (Lewis et al. 1992). Thanks to the efforts of women like Brenda, counselling training secured a place within colleges and universities. The growth of counselling has also been accompanied by the development of systems of voluntary self-regulation, designed to enhance and monitor standards of practice and to provide members of the public with accessible and effective complaints procedures. These developments have raised the status of counselling, making it more like a profession (Bondi 2004a). That those involved in the development of counselling should seek to secure recognition for counselling as a professional practice offering women meaningful and worthwhile careers is not surprising. Indeed, the professionalisation of counselling can be read as an expression of attempts to secure gender equality by placing counselling work on a par with, or equivalent to, other occupations.

In contrast to Erica's story, Debbie's highlights tensions between them as she finds herself caught uncomfortably between the tradition of volunteering within which counselling was initially shaped, and the drive towards professional status. This transition has not yet been fully achieved, and practitioners are by no means united in their willingness to give up the independence that came with its more marginal position. At the moment, counselling in the UK occupies an intermediate position, and Debbie's story highlights some of the difficulties and disappointments that ensue, and the persistence of inequalities that undermine women's capacity

for financial independence.

Diversity

The accounts I have presented so far indicate that, despite its historic association with middle-class voluntarism, counselling work is open to women from working-class backgrounds. A number of other stories suggest that counselling also responds positively to issues of sexual orientation. For example, Patricia's experience of counselling training precipitated the realisation that she was gay:

> "the first year of my counselling training, without me understanding what it was I was really thinking or whatever – that's where giving myself the space to reflect on who I was – it began that process of recognition and realisation. […]. So obviously that's been an enormous change for me personally."

In less dramatic ways other interviewees described their experience of counselling or counselling training as validating what that had previously felt to be problematic forms of difference. For example Hilda described her involvement in counselling as "like coming home", saying that before she trained she thought she was "quite odd", and then realised that she wasn't.

Against this, some practitioners argue that these forms of openness do not necessarily move beyond a bland proclamation of tolerance. For example Daphne expressed concern about a general silence around issues of class, commenting that

> "[it] should really be talked about but it's almost like it's kind of – I don't know if it's taboo or just doesn't occur to people. […] It's almost like, well, poverty is here, you know. There's that phrase 'the poor are always with us.'"

Moreover, black and ethnic minority groups continue to be under-represented among practitioners and probably among clients too. There is evidence of a familiar pattern in which black and ethnic minority groups have responded to the effects of racism by developing black-led services. For example, one practitioner described how she was confronted by racism in voluntary sector settings and in public sector settings, eventually finding a more comfortable place in a black-led agency. The impact of such agencies has been complex. In separate interviews with the managers of two other agencies, both interviewees expressed some discomfort when I asked them about the accessibility of their services to clients from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. One of them remarked on the "advent" of a black-led agency, saying

> "they got monies to train women from different minority ethnic backgrounds to counsel within that area. I think that raised the profile, but I think there is still a problem [...] of having integrated services. […] There seems to be a lot of separation" (Vanessa)

Very similar patterns are evident in relation to issues of disability with disabled groups developing dedicated services for disabled people. Overall therefore, practitioners' accounts endorse the view that counselling engages with the theme of diversity no more than partially and superficially.

Deconstruction

Turning to the theme of deconstruction, some accounts suggest that counselling supports women and men to re-examine and redefine their sense of who they are, but the extent to which this

brings into question the stability of gender categories appears very limited. For some practitioners counselling – like Brenda and Erica – counselling work provides an opportunity to develop a rewarding work identity. For example, Jenny said:

> "it feels incredibly exciting to be doing [this work]. I often have an amazing sense […] something very spiritual when I'm sitting in front of a client [… and] however difficult the client, whatever I'm experiencing, I have a sense that, yes, this is where I'm meant to be at the moment."

However, the great majority of accounts tend to reverse the devaluation of attributes conventionally ascribed to women, rather questioning, let alone destabilising, gender distinctions. When asked why they think that women predominate among practitioners, interviewees typically appeal to associations between women, care and emotional life:

> "I think women are generally [more] in touch with their feelings and are [more] able to express and speak about what's going on than men can do. I don't doubt that men feel them but it's just [that] they don't really know how to deal with or express them." (Karen)

> "I think society brings up females to be naturally more caring. I don't think that males are less caring; I just think society expects females to be more caring. I think that's pretty much the way it is. We're brought up to be the carers and therefore it's maybe a much more natural step for us." (Maria)

Elsewhere I have explored the spatiality of counselling, arguing that it is a practice that recognises the co-construction of space and subjectivity and that seeks to offer a context in which self-experience may be reshaped through therapeutic relationships that are conceptualised spatially (Bondi with Fewell 2003). Thus, counsellors describe what they do in ways that draw on ideas about the exploration and renegotiation of people's experiences of: their positions in relation to others, their sense of where they are in their existential worlds, and spaces both within and beyond themselves. While these ideas offer environments within which ways of living gendered lives might be rethought, practitioners' comments on gender issues remain cast within rather traditional assumptions about 'feminine' and 'masculine' attributes.

Concluding comments

Pulling together the threads of this paper, I have argued that counselling, as it has developed in the UK, can be understood to express some of the themes of feminist politics. With regard to the theme of equality, I have argued that one of the distinctive features of counselling is its commitment to egalitarian relationships between clients and practitioners, and its aversion to status hierarchies. The theme of equality is also evident in the development of free services that can be accessed without intermediaries, and the openness of training to those without educational or professional qualifications, as well as its availability free of charge in return for unpaid work. In these ways, counselling offers spaces that women can enter on genuinely equal terms to men.

Turning to the theme of autonomy, counselling opens up spaces in which women can foreground personal issues and concerns on their own terms, and with a view to enhancing their capacity for self-determination. The meaning attached to the autonomy of these spaces is ambiguous. To some extent the creation of autonomous spaces is regarded as an end in itself, counselling being prized as an alternative to statutory forms of provision that also operates outside the framework of waged labour. However, like many such alternatives there has also been

a powerful move towards incorporation within the state and the labour market (Wolch 1990), in which case the creation of autonomous spaces has the potential to serve as a precondition necessary for, and to be superseded by, the development of a strategy of gender equality and integration. This potential is not necessarily realised, in which case autonomy militates against equality.

My account is also ambivalent in relation to themes of diversity and deconstruction. With regard to the former counselling appears to be capable of recognising and working across differences, but tends to remain bound within a liberal discourse of tolerance, within which difference is viewed as superficial and is de-politicised. One effect of this is the closeting of feminism to which I have referred. By failing to problematise diversity adequately, counselling discourages debate about political affinities and alliances.

Turning to deconstruction, counselling privileges qualities often associated with femininity, notably emotional life. In so far as the gendering of these attributes is brought into question, counselling would appear to offer scope for the deconstruction of gendered categories. However, the qualification is important: if the boundaries between femininity and masculinity are taken-for-granted, counselling may have the opposite effect. On this point, evidence from practitioners is mixed, the closeting of feminism again pointing to a failure to problematise distinctions between femininity and masculinity.

In conclusion, that I cannot give a decisive answer to the question of whether counselling is a feminist practice is not surprising given the multiplicity of feminisms. As I have shown counselling is equally diverse, containing possibilities for, and closures against, the expression of feminist commitments. This mixed experience is, perhaps, typical of what emerges from efforts to modify, and develop alternatives to, mainstream policies that purport to address women needs.

---

[1] This section draws on ideas elaborated at greater length elsewhere (see Bondi and Davidson, 2003, and Bondi 2004b).

[2] Prior to the second world war, married women were legally barred from working for the British government. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, assumptions and cultural pressures pervading workplaces often had the same effect, with variations in different parts of the UK.

Acknowledgement

This paper is based on a keynote presentation delivered at the IGU Gender and Geography Workshop 'Placing Gender/Making Policy', Toronto, May/June 2002. I am most grateful to the organisers Fran Klodawsky and Valerie Preston for the invitation to speak, to Vera Chouinard for her enormously generous introduction, and to all those who participated in the session. The paper draws on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (R000239059) whose support is gratefully acknowledged. My thanks also to all those who participated in the research, to my co-researchers Arnar Árnason, Judith Fewell and Colin Kirkwood, and to Wendy Faulkner for comments on an earlier draft.

References

Bond, Tim,: 1993 *Standards and Ethics for Counselling in Action* Sage, London.

Bondi, Liz,: 2003 A situated practice for resituating selves: trainees counsellors and the promise of counselling *Environment and Planning A* 35: 853-870

Bondi, Liz, Fewell, Judith, Kirkwood, Colin, and Árnason, Arnar (2003) *Voluntary Sector Counselling: an Overview* The Counselling and Society Research Team, The University of Edinburgh.

Bondi, Liz,: 2004a "A double-edged sword"? The professionalisation of counselling in the United Kingdom *Health and Place* 10, 319-328

Bondi, Liz,: 2004b For a feminist geography of ambivalence *Gender, Place and Culture* 11, 3-15

Bondi, Liz, and Davidson, Joyce,: 2003 Troubling the place of gender. In Anderson, Kay, Domosh, Mona, Pile, Steve, and Thrift, Nigel (eds) *Handbook of Cultural Geography* pp. 325-343. Sage, London.

Bondi, Liz with Fewell, Judith 2003,: 'Unlocking the cage door': counselling, care and space *Social and Cultural Geography* 4: 527-547

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy,: 2002 *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, Rugby.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy,: 2003 *Annual Report 2002 – 2003* British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, Rugby.

Butler, Judith,: 1990 *Gender Trouble* Routledge, London.

de Beauvior, Simone,: 1949/1997 *The Second Sex* Vintage, London.

Dobash, Rebecca, and Dobash, Russell,: 1992 *Women, Violence and Social Change* Routledge, London.

Faludi, Susan,: 1992 *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* Chatto, London.

Fraser, Nancy,: 2000 Rethinking recognition *New Left Review* 3: 107-120

Hague, Gill, and Malos , Ellen,: 1993 *Domestic Violence: Action for Change*, New Clarion Press, Cheltenham.

Hirsch, Marianne, and Keller, Evelyn Fox, (eds),: 1990 *Conflicts in Feminism* Routledge, London.

Lewis, Jane, Clark, David, and Morgan, David H.,: 1992 *Whom God Hath Joined Together: The Work of Marriage Guidance* Routledge, London.

Massey, Doreen,: 1994 *Space, Place and Gender* Polity Cambridge.

McLeod, John,: 1993 *An Introduction to Counselling* Open University Press, Buckingham.

Mitchell, Juliet,: 1974 *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Morgan, Robin, (ed.): 1970 *Sisterhood is Powerful* Vintage, New York.

Mullender, Audrey,: 1996 *Rethinking Domestic Violence* Routledge, London.

Pratt, Geraldine and Hanson, Susan,: 1994 Geography and the construction of difference *Gender, Place and Culture* 1: 5-30

Probyn, Elspeth,: 2003 The spatial imperative of subjectivity. In Anderson, Kay, Domosh, Mona, Pile, Steve, and Thrift, Nigel (eds) *Handbook of Cultural Geography* pp. 290-299 Sage, London.

Ramazanoglu, Caroline,: 1989 *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression* Routledge, London.

Rees, Teresa,: 1999 Mainstreaming equality. In Watson, Sophie, and Doyal, Leslie (eds) *Engendering Social Policy*, pp. 163-183. Open University Press, Buckingham.

Rogers, Carl,: 1951 *Client-Centered Therapy* Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Rogers, Carl,: 1961 *On Becoming a Person* Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Rose, Gillian,: 1993 *Feminism and Geography* Polity, Cambridge.

Rose, Jacqueline,: 1983 Femininity and its discontents *Feminist Review* 14: 5-21.
Spain, Daphne,: 1992 *Gendered Spaces* University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
Valentine, Gill,:1997 Making space: separatism and difference. In Jones III, John Paul, Nast, Heidi J., and Roberts, Susan M. (eds) *Thresholds in Feminist Geography* pp. 65-76. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham MD.
Weir, Angela, and Wilson, Elizabeth,: 1984 The British women's movement *New Left Review* 148
Whelehan, Imelda,: 1995 *Modern Feminist Thought* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh
Wilson, Elizabeth,: 1981 Psychoanalysis: psychic law and order *Feminist Review* 8:. 63-78.
Wolch, Jennifer; 1990 *The Shadow State: Government and Voluntary Sector in Transition* The Foundation Centre, New York